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ABSTRACT

To make freedom work in the writing classroom, the instructor must be highly structured, possessing a clear sense of direction that includes a precise idea of the skills to be covered. Freedom refers to the view of writing as a liberal art, a liberating force with the capacity to open new channels of thought and lead students to discover themselves and the world outside. A truly liberating course would also supply students with the tools of grammar and the mechanics to handle any writing challenge. Such a course convinces wary students that writing is a positive progression from thought to word. The devices used in the early stages of such a course include free writing, journal writing, and narrative writing. In the first stages of a "free" course, students discover the power of language through narrative writing. Then they may test their thinking with exercises in logic or situational ethics. At this point, students will be ready for grammar and structure lessons to enhance their communication. Publishing writings in a "newspaper" helps students recognize that the end goal of all writing is communication--to audiences other than the teacher. The only real problem with such a course is timing: the tension between a desire to let students progress at their own pace, and the need to finish the course by the end of the semester. (HTH)

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Twila Yates Papay

Freedom Is Structure

During my graduate school days I was one of about a dozen teaching assistants who learned to teach writing by helping to create a developmental composition program at our university. At one of our weekly meetings the program's director happened to remark that I was probably the least structured of our teachers, and, being a product of the sixties, I took this as a compliment. But as I thought about that remark over the next few weeks, I felt less flattered and more misunderstood. After all, wasn't I the same person whom colleagues described as being "intensely organized"? Wasn't I the cook who managed to serve elaborate dinners by secretly preparing timetables which even listed when to peel the potatoes? More importantly, wasn't I the same teacher who kept voluminous records on each student's progress and worried if I couldn't justify every activity as a "genuine writing experience"? Well, as the paranoia has worn off over the years, I've come to see myself as a highly structured teacher advocating a group of methods which have at times been misunderstood. Indeed, many people seem to assume that freeing the student, treating writing as a liberating force, means that the <u>teacher</u> is unstructured. Yet in point of fact, quite the opposite is true. To make freedom work in the classroom, the instructor must be <u>highly</u> structured, possessing a clear sense of direction which includes a precise collection of skills to be covered.

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Flexibility in method and timetable will be compensated for by hard work and intense organization. Thus, while it might be argued that license breeds chaos, real freedom necessitates structure.

When I speak of freedom, I refer to a philosophy of education which views writing as a liberal art, a liberating force with the capacity to open new channels of thought and lead students to discover themselves and the world outside. One student explains it like this:

> Learning to write has made me set priorities in my thoughts and feelings. By forcing me to convey these thoughts and formulate my own ideas, it has made me respect myself as an individual and has liberated me to take control of my own life.

To achieve these ends, a "free" writing course must begin with the student, helping her to record her own thoughts, and enabling her to think more clearly, to develop informed opinions about an expanding number of ideas and objects outside herself. The "liberating devices" frequently used in the early stages of such a course include those popularized by Dr. Ken Macrorie: free writing, focused free writing, journals, telling facts, and a variety of exercises in narrative writing. And herein lie the roots of opposition to such a course, for many teachers fear the use of narrative writing, assuming that students will be led to narcissistic euphoria and never brought safely into the realm of quotation marks, subordinate constructions, or the argumentative essay.

Yet even these weighty arguments can be laid to rest, for a truly liberating course must supply its students with the tools to handle any writing challenge if they are to be truly "free." Thus, the focus upon the self is a means of encouraging originality and thought, but the teacher will still demand that that thought be applied to any number and variety of problems. I speak, then, of freeing students by offering them control over language, a real control which can only be achieved by starting with their own minds and working outward.

The advantages of such an approach to the teaching of writing are readily apparent if we consider <u>why</u> it is important to write well and reject narrow definitions. Certainly if writing becomes a real liberating force, if it encourages students to analyze themselves and others in a critical way, it will achieve an important goal in any liberal education. As one student wrote:

> There is something about sitting down and letting my frustrations out on paper that helps release inner tensions. I wouldn't quite call it a challenge, although it is, and I wouldn't call it punishment, but perhaps sometimes it is that too. I guess more properly, writing is a tool by which I can get what is inside of me out where I can take a better look at it.

Secondly, to the extent that we persuade students to look to themselves for writing material and to develop responsible opinions which they can support in what they write, we convince them that writing is a legitimate means of communicating their own thoughts. Thus we combat the myth

that the written word is obsolete. Thirdly, since students learn from free writing that they can, in fact, write, that they have real ideas and the capacity to put them in physical form on a printed page, they develop confidence and a willingness to carry out the more structured assignments they receive later in the course.

And finally, if students work outward from their own ideas, they will discover that writing is a positive act, a genuine progression from idea to word (i.e., rough statement) to form (i.e., organization). Hence we illustrate that writing and thinking are closely related. We persuade our students that having something to say and saying it well are both essential. Learning to think becomes as important as learning to punctuate, and students may be led to write papers which are meaningful as well as technically correct. Such an outcome is particularly desirable in light of recent evidence cited in College English (March, 1979, pp. 827-28) that competency tests are, in fact, trivializing English language skills by persuading the student that authorities prize nothing but usage, that "'it is more important to be able to edit seven types of errors than to write one or two paragraphs.'"

Freedom, then, means learning to think, learning to control, learning to take our own ideas and shape them into powerful statements which reach out to other people. But how does the writing teacher structure a "free" course which addresses itself to these admittedly ambitious goals? It is

something like developing an elaborate dance in which there are a series of steps taken by individuals, not randomly, but not at the same pace either. And, of course, from time to time someone gets out of step and must follow an alternate route to reach the end of the dance hall.

In the first stages, students will begin to discover the power of language. Through the use of free writing, they may be led to establish dialogues with themselves, to see that they have ideas of their own. If they then begin to focus upon single topics for each free writing, they will learn to group ideas and seek thought patterns. My own students credit this process with sharpening their thinking and concentration skills as well, for, as one young woman suggested, "Whenever the teacher tells me to write whatever comes into my mind, my mind goes blank, and I really have to think hard and try to put all my ideas down."

Having learned that they can, indeed, get ideas onto paper, students may next be led to write about their own experiences. One must not minimize the importance of this stage. Narration is a legitimate means of introducing students to the pleasures of writing, and it may serve to develop confidence, encourage interest in exploring ideas, and underline the need for a grasp of sentence structure and grammatical principles. Some of my best students also insist that practicing narrative skills taught them the principles of organization, for as they revised personal

experience papers they had read in class, they realized how many problems faulty organization had created. One delightfully spine-tingling paper on a late-night burglar in the house, for example, was spoiled when the writer told us too soon that her brother had certainly given her a scare. Furthermore, through narration students will soon perceive that writing leads to self-awareness, problem-solving, and clear thinking.

At this stage individual conferences can be used to help the student discover the relationship of one situation to general trends. Here we may show our students that we take ideas very seriously and respect those who try to think through relationships. An extension of the same process is the use of journals as a history of ideas. Again, we must stress IDEAS, not grammar. Our comments must be about the student thinking, the exploration going on, and we must be careful not to shut off the flow by forcing a concentration on techniques.

After several weeks of this intensive focus upon their own ideas, students will be ready to test their thinking, to expand in new directions. Now we must reiterate the need to use the skills they have already mastered. This notion took root very slowly with one of my students this year, who wrote beautiful details in her narrations,but returned to abrupt generalizations for other papers. When I praised one paper for including an example or two, she exclaimed,"When I write

what I think and stop you give me C's, but when I embroider my paper with decorations you like it! It's just like the stories we wrote." We must be prepared at this stage to reward writing which reflects thinking, analyzing, relating one thing to another. This will move the student from narration to progressively more objective approaches, thereby stilling the protests that students who begin with narration never write anything else.

Writing at this point is often fuzzy at first. To clarify thinking and introduce structure without deadening the class, we may encourage "think and explore" activities: small group discussions, an assignment to write two papers reflecting the opposite sides of an issue, questions in situational ethics, logic exercises. As students begin to concentrate on exploring new ideas and alternative modes of expression, they may begin to slip away from the use of sharp detail. They may forget the close relationship between thinking and writing and start recording the undigested thoughts of others. This problem can be resolved if we encourage the blending of personal experience examples with details garnered from secondary sources. Response to new ideas may be wedded to analysis.

By the middle of the course, most students will have grown very proud of their capacities to originate and expand upon ideas. They will be anxious to test their thinking upon others, and if we can demonstrate that poor sentence

structure or faulty grammar obscures the idea, students will be ready to revise. As one student put it, "I think that if we want to learn how to write in this way, we have to work harder by ourselves in grammar." Thus, while we may be unable to "teach" the grammar book as a Bible, we may persuade our students to use it as a reference tool in relation to their own sentences. Our attitude must be that language is a source of power, that good usage provides alternatives. The same is true, of course, for sentence structure. The student who has acquired several options for saying the same thing controls language and is able to turn it to advantage.

But it is not enough that students should learn to write for themselves in composition courses. They must recognize that the end goal of all writing is communication, not just with a teacher, but also with one's peers. This goal is best accomplished by publishing student writing in a weekly "newspaper" which students use as their initial reading material. The effects of such a "newspaper" upon writing quality are especially gratifying. When she was not published in the first issue, one student wrote, "I began to think more seriously about the assignments. It was like a shock I needed to begin to work harder." And the knowledge that every word they put to paper has a potential audience of 100 people or more, my students tell me, encourages thoughtful writing and careful editing.

Throughout the stages of this "free" course in composition, we must remember that students learn by doing. They must write on a daily basis, and their programs should include both the self-directive journal and more structured assignments which move them through the steps I've described. To a great extent, the flexibility of the teacher determines the success of "freedom" in any writing course. For the teacher performs a sort of balancing act, selecting daily activities and assigning papers which can be adapted to benefit the entire class, even while allowing individual students to progress at different paces and in different ways. Thus, the teacher structures the course so as to free the student.

Having demonstrated, then, that freedom is compatible with structure, I cannot resist ending this discussion by offering some grist for the traditionalist's mill. There <u>are</u> disadvantages to my method. It demands a great deal of the teacher. It sometimes confuses the student, who is already leery of writing courses. In fact, I once had a student who spent the first month of class turning in copies of his cousin's papers from the year before. "Why would anyone bother to <u>copy</u> free writings?" I asked him. He was so certain I couldn't possibly want to read what he had clearly heard me tell him to write that he simply assumed he had misunderstood, and his confusion mounted as he copied his cousin's papers, for her year-old ideas held no clue as to what I expected of <u>him</u>.

But these are not the real problems. If we're serious about teaching composition we expect to work hard, and confused students can be led to understand as the course progresses. No, the real problem is timing: a tension between an urgent desire to let students progress at their own paces, and a very real need to finish the course by the end of December or May. Not being Wonder Woman myself, I can offer no easy solutions. I can only suggest that while this method works beautifully for a two-semester course in developmental composition, it can also be adapted to any writing program at any level on any timetable. I know, because I've used it in a freshman composition course which met for ten Saturdays, in a trimester course in Rhetoric for Teachers, in one and two semester composition courses at all levels, and in a six-week summer tutorial in Advanced Exposition for a junior executive of a major bank, who received most of his instruction by telephone. But for me the acid test of this method came just this year, when I adapted it for use in an English as a Second Language class of twenty-five students, most of whom first came to the United States in September, some knowing little more than "hello," "toilet," and "yes." Of course, their levels varied enormously, and I've worked with them on speech, usage, and culture in another class as well, but their entire course of instruction in composition followed the pattern I've just described. I've been quoting them in this

discussion, and their work can be read in issues of our student newspaper, International Thoughts. Some of these students have just mastered basic expression, while others are well into the development of structured, formal essays, but all illustrate the principle that self-paced instruction produces students who care enough about what they write to aspire to write their best. I don't think I've given them license, and the only chaos I've created is in my own briefcase. But certainly I've used freedom to give them control of language, and that freedom has been both the product and the source of structure.

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